

Illustrious Duxburyites

Frederick Bradford Knapp

By THE REV. CANON ROBERT MERRY

How do we remember and how are we stimulated to remember persons or events of significance? Through its history, the human race has adopted various means of reminding its members of people and circumstances that we felt were important to recall to constitute a "living heritage." One way of reminding was by permanent monuments like those to Washington and Lincoln and Jefferson in our nation's capital. Another was through naming public achievements such as bridges and buildings or endowing institutions. I remember my professor of government at Harvard who had to deliver one lecture a year on the virtues and achievements of Jonathan Trumbull, a governor of Connecticut of some note as the condition of receiving an endowment.

Duxbury has a significant number of historic reminders, many of which consist of beautiful granite markers set in place as part of the Tercentenary Celebration in 1937. Other markers consist of boulders appropriately inscribed as noted in connection with this article. Mayflower Cemetery has monuments to war heroes on either side of the main entrance where the American Legion holds ceremonies every Memorial Day. The square formed by the juncture of Depot and Tremont Streets was named for a veteran of World War I, Charles Boomer. I remember vividly the Memorial Day we dedicated this triangle of land to his memory.

But so far as my information goes only one man in Duxbury's history has a forest named after him and that is Frederick Bradford Knapp. Duxbury's town forest has been designated as a memorial to him. I remember him well as he was my father's constant companion during the days of the organizing of the Duxbury Fire Department and the providing of municipal water to the town. My father and Mr. Knapp also toured all the towns in southeastern Massachusetts together with advice about the prevention of forest fires. The partnership was a bit like that of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza in that story of the revival of knight errantry. That is if you can think of Sancho Panza as the practical man of action and Don Quixote as the dreamer who tilted against windmills. This is how they worked together -- each man's talents supplementing those of the other.



Frederick Bradford Knapp

Knapp was the dreamer, the visionary and my father was the hard headed realist. The town owes much to this combination of skills and talents that did much to enhance the quality of life as we enjoy it today in Duxbury.

came from Cuba and Latin America. It was a great sight while the school was in session to see the entire student body of 150 boys thronging Powder Point Avenue and lower Washington St. on Sunday after noons to come for an ice cream cone and a chocolate soda at Paul Peterson's drugstore.

Frederick Knapp had advanced ideas about education and loved to try them out on his students. His bronze plaque mentions him as a "publicist" for he was a pioneer in many ways and never stopped trying to make his dreams and visions acceptable.

But being a Don Quixote he did not have the ability to sway the minds of others. Time and again I saw him stand up at Town Meeting erect with his square shoulders elaborating some scheme he thought helpful to the town only to have the moderator delay recognition or when he spoke people would nudge one another and laugh up their sleeves at his wild ideas. Many knew him to be 10 years ahead of his time.

Next to his interest in the school was his passionate pursuit of proper fire protection equipment. It was here that he first worked on a community level with my father not only for hand pumped fire engines replenished from nearby wells by bucket brigades, but for a new fire and water district. He was Duxbury's first fire chief, succeeded by Eden Soule, then by my father. Early firehouses were located opposite Cedar St. and at the end of Bumble Bee Lane. Number one firehouse was moved from this Cedar St. location to just beyond the stone bridge across Blue Fish River to take advantage of horse power available at Briggs' Livery Stables. A new hand-drawn and pumped tub wagon was bought in 1910 and is now on display at the Edaville Railroad museum in Carver. A model T Ford with two 50-gallon chemically pressured tanks was purchased around 1917; then a thoroughly modern Brockway was bought in 1923. These latter I knew well and rode often to house, grass and forest fires.



Mr. Knapp developed an early conservation concern, and this is probably why his memorial is so appropriate. He studied the lands, the meadows and woodlands and sought new ways for the town to acquire open space and to improve the growth of existing timberlands. Forest fires were a particular worry to him and he was known to have packed his overnight camping equipment, strapped it on his back and spent 3 days at a time in the woods.

It was here his passion for eradicating forest fires took off with his mathematical genius and his love of the woods. It was he who using a church belfry and the Standish Monument taught other men how by triangulation to spot the exact location of a fire and hence the ability to snuff it out before it became a conflagration.

It was on Feb. 14, 1933, a year after his death, that my father, then fire chief, and the Duxbury Fire Department, held a celebration to recognize his contribution to the town and set aside the Town Forest Memorial to him. There were many tributes to his life and work (all available today in a little book marked "Frederick Bradford Knapp: Educator, Publicist, Forester," in the Duxbury Room of the Duxbury Free Library.) What comes through them all is a paean of praise to Frederick Knapp the man. He was above all an extraordinary human being. Perhaps the easiest way to describe him is to say that he exemplified the greatest of New England Yankee character. He was an indefatigable worker; you might say a fighter. When Powder Point School was burning and given up as lost he was still inside and when rescuers approached him he shouted, "I can't leave, I've got to fight."

His greatest virtue was his Yankee work ethic -- today he'd be described as a "workaholic" and yet he was a gentleman through and through, always courteous and kind.

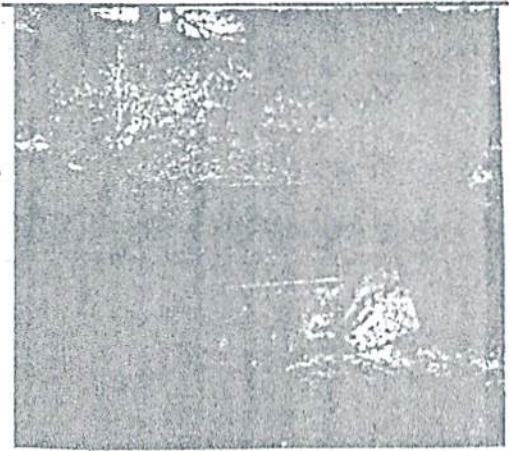
I remember Mr. Knapp well with his high-pitched voice, his short square beard and his sparkling eyes. He was reputed to have been one of the most brilliant mathematical minds in the Commonwealth. Born in New Hampshire and moving with his family to Plymouth where his father, a minister, had been called to be pastor of the Unitarian Church, he came to Duxbury and founded Powder Point School in 1886. He served 18 years as headmaster and from the earliest time of his arrival took a deep interest in town affairs. His concerns focussed on pushing a town water facility, and organizing a fire department. My father and he worked hand in hand to achieve these 2 closely related goals.

I remember Powder Point School well as we used to deliver milk there from our North Hill dairy farm. In fact it was a graduate of this school then headmaster of his own school in Hawaii who invited me to come and teach there after my graduation from college. The school flourished until its closing in 1926 and furnished preparation for more prestigious schools like Groton, Andover and Exeter. Many boys

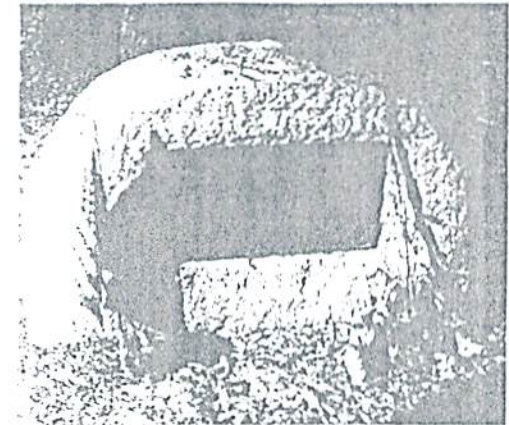
He was ahead of his time in his energy expended to get people involved in his schemes. He was never content to discover things for himself and parade them as his individual discoveries. Selectmen, town department heads welcomed him into their discussions knowing that there wasn't a selfish bone in his body. It is hard to say who has done most to preserve what we call Duxbury's quality of life, but it can be said that no one has done more than Frederick Knapp. He was elected president of the Duxbury Rural Society in 1889 and served several years assisting the society in its work. One advance that he and my father made with the sponsorship of the Society was the cutting of "firebreaks," i.e., wide paths where a forest fire could be held, and the digging of waterholes at frequent locations throughout the woods so firemen with hand buckets and pumps could have a ready supply of water to hold fires in check.

At this point we are especially grateful to Mr. Knapp because the mushroom growth of our town is changing the face of the landscape. Had it not been for his foresight we would never have been able to enjoy the open woods and streams and meadows whose acres he got together for us.

His love of young people in his beloved Powder Point School was evident in all his later life. He was so anxious to convince people, so much so that his



memorial plaque includes the word, "Publicist" along with "Educator" and "Forester." He tried so hard to secure acceptance for his pioneering ideas but by some mystery, so often people turned their backs on his ideas; was he too brilliant for them? Ironically, despite this general truth about him he had a knack for organization, first bringing the Duxbury Fire Department from a scattered set of 12 fire districts each presided over by one man into one unified group all working toward the one goal of fire protection and prevention. Then, too he molded the various country forest fire departments into one association so the efforts of improving their tasks could be shared by all.



Duxbury has many memorials to many people, some in land set aside, others by granite slabs and boulders. The latest of these sits on the lawn of the American Legion House at the corner of Tremont and West streets. It commemorates the brave men of Duxbury who gave their lives in the Korean and Vietnam wars. In this and countless other ways, Duxbury reminds its citizens of its great past and those who made it great. In Longfellow's words:

*Lives of great men all remind us
We can make our lives sublime
And departing leave behind us
Footprints on the sands of time
Footprints that perhaps another sailing
o'er
Life's solemn main
A forlorn shipwrecked brother may
take heart again*

PEOPLE - KNAPP, FREDERICK BRADFORD